

## Shield the Joyous

Readings: from *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* by Audre Lorde  
'Gelati' by Carl Dennis  
'Wild Geese' by Mary Oliver

My mother-in-law is a good gift giver. She keeps careful lists of what people mention throughout the year, does research, and finds items or experiences to give that makes the recipient know they were carefully considered.

She almost always gives my husband who is a chef and brewer, food-related items. A special jam. A chutney. A jar of green tomato pickles. A few years ago, she gave him a little metal jar of leatherwood honey. Leatherwood honey is produced by bees in the rainforests of Tasmania, mainly from the Leatherwood tree. It tastes like no other honey I've ever had – not overwhelmingly sweet, but complex, almost a little musky, and spicy. It tastes like honey, but with the volume turned up so I can taste subtleties that I miss in regular honey.

We loved this gift of leatherwood honey and started eating it by the spoonful. Even remembering it is making my mouth water right now... and then, we thought we should probably save some for later, so we put the metal jar on a pantry shelf. Over a few weeks, it got pushed to the back of the shelf and forgotten. A year later, I was cleaning out the pantry and found that little metal jar. I called out to Brian and we got our spoons ready to have another taste of this honey that we can't believe we had forgotten... and it didn't taste the same. It tasted like sweet metal. It had sat in its metal jar too long and the taste of the metal had leached in, destroying the honey's flavor. We were both so sad.

And I tell this story not to make everyone hungry for a particular honey, but because it is a parable, of sorts, about joy and pleasure, the topic for today. Joy and pleasure, letting the soft animal of your body love what it loves, is not something that works on our timetables. While delayed gratification is real, a postponed joy is often a joy that is never realized. If we set conditions on when we will have joy, if we need to have a clean house before we can watch a movie or get all our coursework done before we pause to dance to favorite music, we won't get there, we will never get there.

I've realized recently that I'm not very good at joy. I love it when it comes to me unbidden, a surprising inbursting of music, but I is not something that I approach with care and thought. And when joy comes, it is often fleeting. It takes one hard headline or one remembering of a dear one in a hard time to shatter the joy. That is, in part, why I pray for the shielding of the joyous every week – that those of us who are in the fragile state of joy, will have extra fortification to hold onto the joy in the midst of this world that is so often wailing.

In my reflections on joy, I've recognized that the Aesop's fable about the ant and the grasshopper is a story that I've internalized. It is a story that has served me well at times, but is one that I need to balance with other wisdom.

The ancient Greek fable takes place in the middle of winter. After a spell of wet days, the sun finally breaks through and some ants decide to bring some of the grain they worked so hard to gather all summer and fall out into the sun to dry out. A starving grasshopper comes hopping by, sees the ants' grain and begs for some grain.

The ants then ask the grasshopper questions, to decide if he is worthy of their charity. "May we ask, what you were doing with yourself all last summer? Why didn't you collect a store of food for the winter?"

The grasshopper responds, "I was so busy singing that I didn't have the time."

Since he spent the summer singing, the ants are unwilling to help the grasshopper... they chuckle and go on with their work.<sup>1</sup>

The moral of the story, in the edition of *Aesop's Fables* that I read to my children, is about being prepared for hard times, but I internalized it as hard work is more important than joy, that pleasure should be postponed if there are more productive things to do, as though joy can be measured against accomplishment on some sort of scale.

In each of us, there is an ant part— diligent, hardworking, delaying pleasure today in hopes of creating some security tomorrow. And there is the pleasure seeking grasshopper. For me, and I suspect for many of us, the ant part is a whole lot stronger, maybe too much stronger.

Sometimes we avoid joy, pleasure, and what the soft animal of our body loves, because the stories we tell ourselves about being safe in the future. Sometimes, we tell ourselves that joy is frivolous, especially when the state of the world seems so dire.

Saeed Jones is poet who recently wrote a memoir about his growing up black, gay and Buddhist in Tennessee and Texas. It is called *How We Fight for Our Lives* and is one of the most beautiful pieces of writing that I have read in a long time. There is a passage I that has lingered in the months since I read it.

'My mom liked to say "we don't eat coconut cake in this family,"' he writes, 'as if we were the kind of family who created traditions and stuck to them. We weren't. No family reunions; no silly nicknames with winding backstories; no annual family vacations. We did, at least, have a family story about coconut cake. As my grandmother tells it, in 1968, she had just started to slide her knife into the coconut cake the family had made for her birthday when a woman in the living room started wailing. The radio in that room had just cut to breaking news. The announcer said that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and killed downtown. Everyone stood stunned until that woman—a neighbor from down the street—started screaming. My grandmother set down her

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<sup>1</sup> Parker, Vic. *200 Aesop's Fables*. Thaxten, Essex, UK: Miles Kelly Publishing, 2012. Pages 271-272

plate, the piece of cake untouched. She knew that woman was just going to keep on wailing until someone went in there and calmed her down.'

He continues, 'It had been years since I'd heard that story, but I thought about it often. The sweetness we deny ourselves because the world is wailing.'<sup>2</sup>

The sweetness we deny ourselves because the world is wailing. This phrase haunts me with its recognition that the world is always wailing. There will always be reasons to deny sweetness.

And the thing is, that our denial – of sweetness, of pleasure, of joy, doesn't stop the world's wailing. I'm not suggesting that Jones' family should start eating coconut cake again; those kinds of traumatic associations live in us deeply and might not ever be untangled... Jones recognizes that becoming a family that doesn't eat coconut cake doesn't stop the world's wailing. It just creates denial – the soft animals of our bodies don't get what they love – which adds a little volume to the world's wailing.

And while it is true that the energy and resources spent on joy could possibly be spent on duty, obligation, preparing for the future, and justice – I know that I need joy to do the work of duty, obligation, preparing for the future, and justice.

And maybe that's the wrong way to think about all of this. So far, I've set up duty and pleasure, sweetness and wailing, the ant and the grasshopper as a dichotomy, as opposite ends of a spectrum, as two opposing forces that need to be balanced. What is that's not the best way to approach this? What if there is a better way?

adrienne maree brown, an activist, facilitator, and writer from Detroit whose work has shaped my thinking about the work of justice and the practice of resilience in the face of heartbreak. She published a book last year called *Pleasure Activism*.

The book's back cover reads "How do we make social justice the most pleasurable human experience? How can we awaken within ourselves desires that make it impossible to settle for anything less than a fulfilling life?"

brown's work builds on the work of Audre Lorde and other black queer women who know about claiming joy in a world that wants to deny you that joy. I read a piece of Lorde's powerful essay, 'The Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' earlier today. Lorde and brown state that the practices of joy and pleasure, the hard work of giving the soft animal of your body what it loves, is, in fact justice work. Engaging in deep care for yourself, and finding ways to care for yourself that do not cause harm to yourself or others, is part of how we do justice and create a better world.

brown writes, "I recognize that my sorrow carves out the space for my joy, and that both in this lifetime and in the cycles of my lineage there is so much space that has been carved out by sorrow, and I get to fill it up with joy and pleasure. What a pleasure it is, after all, to be a free Black queer woman. To be a human, self-aware. To be of the earth, with such beauty and interconnectedness.

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, Saeed. from *How We Fight for Our Lives: A Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019. Pages 150-1.

Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom. We can gift it to each other in a million ways: with authentic presence, abundant care, and honesty; with boundaries that keep us from overextending; with slower kisses; with foot massages in the evening; with baby hugs and elder hugs; with delicious food; with supported solitude and listening to our bodies, our shameless desire, and coordinated longing.”

She instructs, “Find the pleasure path for your life and follow it. Let it reverberate healing back into your ancestors’ wounds. Let it open you up and remind you that you are already whole. Let it shape a future where feeling good is the normal, primary experience of all beings.”<sup>3</sup>

I can’t say I fully understand this, but I want to. I can’t say that social justice is currently my most pleasurable human experience, but I want a future where feeling good is the normal, primary experience of all beings... and I know that is so far from our present. And people like Lorde and Brown, people who know more about survival, resilience and justice than I do, tell me that the way for us to get there is to cultivate joy in my life, to do what I love – as long as it doesn’t cause pain.

This is a lot. And sitting with the idea that feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom is shifting things within me, shifting how I show up to people in my life as a minister, friend, family member, shifting how I take care of myself to take care of the world, shifting what I am willing to do for the sake of justice. And I think it is making me better and the world better. I invite you into this shifting alongside me.

And a final teacher about joy is my colleague, the Rev. Erika Hewitt, who serves a church in coastal Maine. She instructs us on how to help shield the joy of others. A few months ago, she wrote

On August 29, 2018, Roger Cooper tweeted plaintively:

“Could we, without relentlessly criticizing, let people have their pumpkin spice, and avocado toast, and their fandoms, and their D&D, and their too-early-Halloween-decorations, and whatever little harmless things in which they’ve manage to find a tiny shriveled flower of joy?”

To date, more than 332,400 people have liked this tweet. I did. I’m in favor of allowing people their “tiny shriveled flower of joy”—what I imagine as small hearth fires that we each build to keep our spirits warm in a cold world.

Surprise: it didn’t take long for the Twitterverse to pile on Mr. Cooper for spelling “avocado” wrong... He patiently thanked his critics for “helping me to know that I’ve made a mistake,” declining to point out the irony in his suffering the very type of relentless criticism whose moratorium he’d been pleading for...

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<sup>3</sup> brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019.  
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Who among us doesn't know that critique, criticism, and assessment are norms of our culture? I'm not talking about affectionate teasing between friends; I mean withering comments and performative boredom looking for an audience. "Oh, is sportsball happening?" asks one person, knowing their friends are thrilled by the World Series nail-biter. "Ugh. You can't listen to Christmas music yet," moans another, as some of us are already weighing when to put out our light-up Christmas llamas...

It makes us feel powerful to be in the judge's seat, I suppose, and some of us are wired to be the outlier, the nay-sayer. But there are days when the culture of knee-jerk critique makes me sad. I notice lately that I hold my small, harmless pleasures close, lest an online friend spit into the small hearth fire that I've tended into a reliable source of warmth.

I'm trying to practice aggressive non-judgment about how you, me, and all of us choose to warm ourselves. Who cares if your harmless pleasure bores or disinterests me? We're all imperfect, and the world can be such a barbed place. We're also merciful—or can be. We can be cheerleaders for simple joys (even when we don't share them) and compassionate about the fact that we're all just trying to survive.<sup>4</sup>

May we be both ants and grasshoppers, diligent workers and joyful singers.

May we embrace the sweetness we can find, even as the world is wailing.

May we seek out our seeds of joy, tend them and watch them grow – and allow others their harmless pleasures.

May this allow us to help shape a future where feeling good is the normal, primary experience of all beings.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Hewitt, Erika A. 'Love What You Love.' *Braver/Wiser*. November 6, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/love-what-you-love>